

EPA's Office of Environmental Policy Innovation— Community Based Environmental Protection

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This summary was taken from the preliminary draft of the report, "Evaluation of Community-Based Environmental Protection Projects: Accomplishments and Lessons Learned." The report will be completed by U.S. EPA in March 2001.

Background

EPA supports and participates in an array of community-based environmental protection (CBEP) efforts throughout the U.S. The CBEP approach brings together public and private stakeholders within a place or community to identify concerns, set priorities, and implement comprehensive solutions. The community-based approach reflects an innovative, place-based approach by EPA with a focus on protecting ecosystems and the goods and services they provide to communities. CBEP considers environmental protection along with human social needs, works toward achieving long-term ecosystem health, and fosters linkages between economic prosperity and environmental well being (U.S. EPA, February 1999).

EPA is currently conducting an evaluation of a small number of CBEP projects with substantial EPA involvement. The evaluation considers both environmental outcomes of each of the projects as well as the overall effectiveness of the CBEP process. Specifically, the evaluation is focusing on the following set of questions:

- ⇒ how have the CBEP projects helped to lay the groundwork for both environmental and community sustainability improvements?
- ⇒ which CBEP attributes are prominent in the selected projects, how are these important in making these projects work well, and what factors affect projects that do not work well?
- ⇒ what was the value added of the CBEP approach for EPA's community partners and for the Agency itself?

The evaluation is intended assist EPA as the Agency considers advantages and disadvantages of community-based projects and how it can tailor its role to best support CBEP efforts.

Methodology

The study team has chosen four projects were chosen to be part of

this evaluation based on several criteria, including geographic diversity and a range of EPA roles (e.g., lead versus support role), as well as projects that encountered institutional challenges, thereby yielding useful lessons regarding how EPA can overcome obstacles and avoid future problems.

Telephone interviews and specific project reports, newsletters and other documents are serving as the primary sources of information for this evaluation. In conducting the evaluation, EPA is attempting to gather perspectives from a cross section of individuals, contacting at least one EPA participant and one project manager from a local partner organization. In a few instances, EPA conducted a greater number of interviews when it became apparent that there were a number of stakeholder perspectives that needed to be included. Time and resource constraints precluded contacting a complete set of relevant project participants in any of these projects. A set of questions were constructed to serve as the foundation for the interviews and were sent to the contacts prior to the phone interviews. A secondary source of information for this evaluation is a wide variety of written material on the projects. These materials include on-line project descriptions, and internal tracking materials made available by the interviewees.

The following four projects are being included in the evaluation study:

- ⇒ San Miguel Watershed Initiative, Colorado—Multi-stakeholder effort to address development and other stressors in a sparsely populated western Colorado watershed.
- ⇒ North Charleston/Charleston CBEP, South Carolina—Multi-stakeholder project to address cross-media environmental and other quality of life concerns for urban communities on the Charleston, South Carolina peninsula.
- ⇒ Eastward Ho!, Florida—Regional partnership to address sprawl through revitalization of cities in South Florida.
- ⇒ York Community-Based Strategic Planning and Development, Pennsylvania—Comprehensive planning process involving active community participation and drawing on brownfields reuse and other green development strategies.

Results and Recommendations

Each of the projects provides a unique story on how the community-based approach is applied. The projects differ from each other in their goals and how the CBEP process was applied. Each project, therefore, has its own set of results and provides different recommendations but the evaluation study is also attempting to provide more generalized results based upon the similarities in process and outcomes among the projects. Three broad questions are addressed in the cross project evaluation portion of the study.

These questions along with associated results are listed below.

How does the CBEP process affect achievement of project goals?

- ⇒ *A meaningful geographic boundary can enhance project success-* the geographic area defined for a CBEP project is instrumental for identifying stakeholders and issues that should be included in the efforts and project managers must be careful to set boundaries so that they are both meaningful to participants and well-suited to the project's overall goals.
- ⇒ *CBEP projects require carefully designed decision-making processes-* Because the CBEP approach relies critically on communication, consensus-building and participation among all stakeholders, careful attention to the design of the decision process is important for the identification and attainment of community goals.
- ⇒ *Clear Roles and Leadership Responsibilities are Essential-* The roles and leadership responsibilities among various institutional and community partners need to be identified and agreed upon in order to create a process that fulfills expectations within the community.
- ⇒ *CBEP Projects May Require Special Time, Resources, and Leadership Commitments-* To meet community goals, projects that take a community-based approach often require time, resources, and leadership commitments beyond those needed for more conventional environmental policy and protection programs.

What value-added benefits does CBEP create?

- ⇒ *CBEP Can Yield New Forms of Integration and Coordination-* A community-based approach can create an "umbrella" that coalesces disparate environmental, social, and economic goals and policy efforts within communities because it provides an integrated framework for thinking about a community as-a-whole.
- ⇒ *CBEP Provides Partnership Benefits that Extend Beyond an Individual Project-* Because the CBEP approach fosters planning and collaborative problem solving it promotes ongoing, long-term partnership-building.
- ⇒ *CBEP Promotes Capacity Building and Sustainability-* By directly involving local entities, such as county planners, developers, public health officials, and average citizens, the projects create a base of knowledge useful after EPA's involvement is complete. Under more traditional approaches, many of these actors would have been on the sidelines or would have made only narrow, specialized contributions.
- ⇒ *CBEP Efforts Create Legitimacy and Signal Community Support-* The CBEP approach can be highly effective at creating community buy-in regarding environmental and other policy decisions.

How can EPA best support CBEP?

- ⇒ *EPA Funding, and How It Is Provided, Is of Crucial Importance-* Funding, including EPA funding is critical to CBEP's efforts as it is often critical to formation and sustenance of projects. EPA should consider funding local community groups and representatives to act as organizers for CBEP projects. EPA should consider providing funding to build upon a community's on-going efforts. To ensure accountability to community members and other partners, EPA should consider providing additional funding for systematically tracking outcomes and programmatic outputs of CBEP efforts.
- ⇒ *In its CBEP Involvement, EPA Should Play a "Niche" Role-* EPA involvement, beyond funding, is most helpful when it is designed to fill a special need or project-specific "niche." Beyond its traditional regulatory role, one of the best roles for EPA is that of providing specialized information, assessments and technical expertise. EPA can provide expertise in areas such as environmental risk assessment, risk communication, process facilitation, technical training and mediation. Where EPA becomes involved, it is important to identify specific Agency roles for each project.

Next Steps

EPA expects this evaluation to be completed in February 2001. The Office of Policy, Economics and Innovation in EPA, the lead office for this program, will use this evaluation in conjunction with other case studies and an analysis of institutional impediments to implementation of CBEP to develop a "CBEP Progress and Opportunities" report for EPA's Reinvention Action Council. The Reinvention Action Council is the senior leadership team responsible for guiding innovation at EPA and is composed of Agency officials from each program office and region; in most cases, the Deputy Assistant Administrator or Deputy Regional Administrator. This report will identify areas where EPA has experienced some success in using the community-based approach but also try to identify options for improving use of CBEP to gain better environmental results at the community level.